

THE KING'S TRYST

A Thrilling Story of How James V. Escaped From a Trap Set For Him By Catherine Douglas.

By
ROBERT BARR
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THE KING RULED. There was none to question the supremacy of James V. At the age of twenty-two he now sat firmly on his throne. He was at peace with England, friendly with France, and was pledged to take a wife from that country. His great-grandfather, James II, had crushed the Black Douglas, and he himself had scattered the Red Douglas to exile. No Scottish noble was now powerful enough to threaten the stability of the throne. The country was contented and prosperous, so James might well take his pleasure as best pleased him. If any danger lurked near him it was unseen and unthought of.

The King, ever first in the chase, whether the quarry ran on four legs or on two, found himself alone on the road leading northwest from Stirling, having outstripped his comrades in their hunt of the deer. Evening was falling and James being some miles from Stirling castle, raised his bugle to his lips to call together his scattered followers, but before a blast broke the stillness his Majesty was accosted by a woman who emerged suddenly from the forest on his left hand.

"My Lord, the King!" she said, and her voice, like the sound of silver bells, thrilled with a note of inquiry.

"Yes, my lassie," answered the young man, peering down at his questioner, lowering his bugle, and raising his frightened horse, which was startled by the sudden apparition before him. "The dusk has not yet so far thickened, but the King could see that his interlocutor was young and strikingly beautiful. Although dressed in the garb of the lower orders, there was a quiet and imposing dignity in her demeanor as she stood there by the side of the road. Her head was uncovered, and her abundant hair, unkempt and unbranded, was ruddy as spun gold. Her complexion was dazzlingly fair, her eyes of the deepest blue, and her features, perfect except that her small mouth showed a trifle too much firmness, a quality which her strong but finely molded chin corroborated. The King, however, never considered of worldly lovelessness, almost held his breath as he gazed down upon the comely face upturned to him.

"They told me at Stirling," she said, "that you were hunting through this district, and I have been searching for you in the forest."

"Good heavens, girl!" cried the King; "have you walked all the way from Stirling?"

"Aye, and much further. It is nothing for I am accustomed to it. And now I crave a word with Your Majesty."

"Surely," replied the King, with enthusiasm. No thought of danger in this unconventional encounter even occurred to him. The natural prudence of James invariably deserted him where a pretty woman was concerned. Now, instead of summoning his train, he looked anxiously up and down the road, listening for any sound of his men, but the stillness seemed to increase with the darkness, and the silence was profound, not even the rustle of a leaf disturbing it.

"And who, my girl, are you?" continued the King, noticing that her eyes followed his glance up and down the road with some trace of apprehension in them, and that she hesitated to speak.

"May I please Your Gracious Majesty, I am a humble firewoman to a noble lady, Margaret Stuart, your honored mother."

"The King gave a whistle of astonishment.

"My mother!" he exclaimed. "Then what in the name of Heaven are you doing here alone, and so far from Methven?"

"We came from Methven yesterday to her ladyship's castle of Doune."

"Then her ladyship must have come to a very sudden resolution to travel, for the constable of Doune is in my hunting party, and I'll swear he expected no visitors."

"My gracious lady did not wish Stuart, the constable, to expect her. nor does she now desire his knowledge of her presence in the castle. She commanded me to ask Your Majesty to request the constable to remain in Stirling, where, she understands, he spends most of his time. She begs Your Majesty to come to her with all speed and secrecy."

"I wonder what is wrong now?" mused the King. "I have not heard from her for nearly a year. She has quarreled with her third husband, I suppose, for the Duke, where matrimony is concerned."

"What does Your Majesty say?" asked the girl.

"I was speaking to myself rather than to you, but I may add that I am ready to go anywhere if you are to be my guide. Lend me your hand and spring up here behind me. We will gallop to Doune at once."

"The young man drew back a step or two.

"No, no," she said. "The Lady Margaret is most anxious that your visit should be unknown to any but herself, so she begs you to dismiss your followers and lay your commands upon Constable Stuart of Doune."

"But my followers are all of them old enough to look after themselves," objected the King, "and the constable is not likely to leave Stirling, where he has remained these many months."

"The Lady Margaret thought," persisted the girl, "that if your retinue returned to Stirling and learned of your continued absence anxiety would ensue, and a search might be undertaken that would extend to Doune."

"How did my lady mother know I was hunting when you could not have learned of my excursion until you reached Stirling?" asked the King, with a glimmer of that caution which appeared to have deserted him.

"The girl seemed somewhat nonplussed by the question, but she answered presently with quiet deliberation:

"Her ladyship was much perturbed and feared I should not find you at the castle. She gave me various instructions, which she trusted I could accomplish."

"My girl," said the King, leaning toward her, "you do not speak like a serving maid. What is your name?"

"I have been a gentleman, sir," she answered, simply. "But women, alas! cannot control their fortunes. My name is Catherine. I will now forward to Doune and wait for you at the further side of the new bridge the jailor has built over the river. If you will secure your horse somewhere before coming to the river and meet me there on foot I will conduct you to the castle. Will you come?"

"Of a surety," cried the King in a loud tone that left no doubt of his intentions. "I shall make you long before you are at the bridge."

As he said this the girl led away in the darkness, and when he raised his bugle to his lips and blew a blast that speedily brought answered calls.

James's unexplained absences were so frequent that his announcement of an intention not to return home that night caused no surprise among his company; so, bidding him good night, they contented off toward Stirling, while he, unaccompanied, set his face to the northwest, and his spurs to the horse's flanks, but his steed was already tired out and could not now keep pace with his impatience. To his disappointment, he did not overtake the girl, but found her waiting for him at the new bridge, and together they walked the short half mile to the castle. The young man was inclined to be conversational, but the girl made brief replies and finally besought his silence.

"The night had proved exceedingly dark, and they were almost at the castle before the huge bulk loomed blackly before them. There was something so sinister in its dark, grim contour that for the first time since he set out on this night adventure a suspicion that he was acting unwisely crossed the King's mind.

He meditated, it was his mother's own castle, the constable of which was a close friend of his—almost, as one might say, a relative, for Stuart was the young brother of his mother's husband, so what could be amiss with this visit?

"You are not taking me to the main entrance," he whispered.

"No, to the postern door."

"Is it intended for the exit of a possible messenger during a siege and not for the entrance of a guest?"

"I am acting in accordance with my instructions," replied the girl. "A rope ladder! That sounds promising; will you ascend it?"

"Yes, sir, but meanwhile I implore Your Majesty to be silent."

"The King said no more until the rope ladder was in his hand.

"I hope it is strong," he murmured.

Then he mounted lightly up in the darkness, until he stood on the sill of the narrow doorway, when he reached forward his hand to assist his slower comrade in mounting, but his spring past him without availing himself of his aid. In a low voice he begged pardon for preceding him. They walked up and a winding staircase on which steps there were barely room for two to pass each other. She pushed open a door and allowed some light to stream through on the turret stair, which disappeared in its dark, grim contour that for the first time since he set out on this night adventure a suspicion that he was acting unwisely crossed the King's mind.

The King found himself in a large square apartment, either on the first or second story. It appeared in some sort to be a lady's boudoir, for the benches were cushioned and comfortable, and there were evidences about on small tables of tapestry work and other needle employment recently abandoned.

"Will Your Majesty kindly be seated?" said the girl. "I must draw up the ladder, close the postern door, and then inform my lady that you are here."

She went out by the way they had entered and shut the door with a force that seemed to the King unnecessary, but he caught his breath an instant later as his quick ear seemed to tell him a bolt had fallen. He rose at once, tried to open the door and discovered what indeed barred on the outside. One other exit remained to be tested; a larger door, found locked, and he returned to the middle of the room and stood there for a few minutes with knotted brow.

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he heard light footsteps coming along the passage, and an instant later the huge iron key, alert to run in this handsome man's, thrown around by the wreckage of the bench he had broken, attempted to lay hands on her.

"Madam," said the King sternly, "I ask you the meaning of this pleasantry."

"Pleasantry," she repeated, "that is a question I may well ask the huge iron key, alert to run in this handsome man's, thrown around by the wreckage of the bench he had broken, attempted to lay hands on her."

"Pleasantry," echoed the girl, staring at him with her hand upon her forehead. "Who I am, and what I am doing here, you very well know, because you brought me here. A change of garb does not change a well-remembered face," and the King bowed to his visitor with a return of his customary courtesy, now that his suspicions were allayed, for he knew how to deal with pretty women. "Madam, there is no queen in Scotland but you are queen by right of nature, and though you don't your gown, you cannot change your golden crown."

The girl's hand unconsciously went up to her ruddy hair, while she murmured more to herself than to him—

"This is James of Catherine's work."

"Catherine was your name in the forest, my lady, what is your name in the castle?"

"Isabel is my name in castle and forest alike. You have met my twin sister, Catherine. Why has she brought you here?"

"Like an obedient son, I am here at the command of my honorable mother; and your sister—if, indeed, goddesses so strangely fair, and so strangely similar can be two persons—has gone to acquaint my mother of my arrival."

The girl's alarm seemed to increase as the King's diminished. Trouble, dismay and fear marked her perfect face, and as the King scrutinized her more minutely, he saw that the firm mouth and the resolute chin of her sister had no place in the more softened and womanly features of the lady before him.

"Your mother? Who is she?"

"First, Margaret Tudor, daughter of the King of England; second, Margaret Stuart, wife of the King of Scotland; third, Margaret Douglas, ill mate of the Earl of Angus; fourth, and let us hope finally, Margaret Stuart again, spouse of Lord Methven and owner of this castle."

The girl swayed as if she would fall, all color struck suddenly from her face.

"The king seized a bench, raised it over his head, and crashed it in bits against the heavier door."

her face. She leaned, nearly fainting, against the stone wall, passing her hand once or twice across her terror-filled eyes.

"Great God!" she moaned, "do not tell me that you are James, King of Scotland, here and alone, in this den of Douglas!"

"Douglas!" cried the King, roused at the hated name. "How can there be Douglases in the Castle of Doune; my mother's house, constabulary by my friend, young Stuart."

"Your mother's house?" said the girl with an uncanny laugh. "When has the Lady Margaret set foot in Doune? Not since she was divorced from my uncle, Archibald Douglas, Earl of Angus, and the constable, Aye, the constable is in Stirling. Doune Castle stands gloomy and alone, but in Stirling with the young king, there are masques and hunting and gayety. Young Stuart draws the revenues of his charge, but pays slight attention to the fulfillment of his duty."

"You are, then, Isabel Douglas? And now, to echo your own question, how came you here? If this is a den of Douglases, as you say, how comes my mother's castle to be officiated by the enemies of her son?"

"That you ask such a question shows little foresight or knowledge of men. When your first stepfather and my uncle, Archibald Douglas, had control of this castle through your mother's name he filled it with his own adherents."

"Naturally, nepotism was a well-known trait of my domineering stepfather, which did not add to his popularity in Scotland. Who can get along or just against a Douglas? Was his cry. But did not young Stuart, when he was made constable, put in his own men?"

"The constable cares nothing for this stronghold so long as it furnishes money which he may spend gayly in Stirling."

"I see. So you and your sister found refuge among your underlings?"

"I fear," she said, "that it is not our safety which is jeopardized."

"The same stronghold which gives immunity to a family of the Red Douglas can hardly be expected to confer security upon James V., their persecutor."

"No. Certainly that would be too much to expect. Are you, then, in this plot against me, my lady?"

"I have not heard of any plot. If there is one, I know nothing of it. I merely acquaint you with some hint of my fears."

"Then I charge you as a loyal subject of the lawful King to guide me to this stronghold into which I have been cozened by treachery and falsehood."

Catherine, who had entered silently and unnoticed through the small door, now stepped forward, drew her sister into the room, took out the huge key, closed the door and locked it, then turned fiercely to the King.

"Her beautiful white right arm was bare to the elbow, the loose sleeve rolled up, and in her hand she held a dagger. With her back against the newly locked door she said:

"I'll be Your Majesty's guide from this castle and your perjured soul shall find exit through a postern gate made by my dagger!"

"Oh, Catherine, Catherine," sobbed Isabel, weeping in fear and horror of the situation, "you cannot contemplate so awful a deed, a murder so foul, for however unworthy he may be, he is still the King."

"What is there foul in riding the world of a reptile such as he? How many innocent lives has he taken to compass his revenge? How many now of our name are exiled and starving because of his action? I shall strike the blow with greater surety, for in killing him I extinguish his treacherous race."

"No good can come from assassination, Catherine."

"What greater evil can spring from his death than from his life?"

"This killing will not bring back those whom he has slain; it will not cause our banished kinsmen to return. It will be a murder for revenge."

"And not the first in Scotland," said Catherine grimly.

The King had once more seated himself and now, resting his chin on his open palm, listened to the discussion with the interest bearing of one who had little concern with its result. A half-amused smile wreathed his lips, and once or twice he made a motion as if he would intervene, but on second thought kept silent.

"Do not attempt this fell deed, dear sister," pleaded Isabel earnestly. "Let us away as we intended. The horses are ready and waiting for us. Our mother is looking for our coming in her room. The night wears on and we must pass Stirling while it is yet dark, so there is no time to be lost. Dear sister, let us quit Scotland, as we purposed, and accursed land to all of our name but let us quit it with unshaken hands."

"Isabel, darling," said Catherine in a low voice that quivered with the emotion caused by her sister's distress and appeal, "what unlucky chance brought you to this fatal door at such a moment? Can you not understand that I have gone too far to retreat? Who, having caused a tiger, dare open again the gate and set him free? If for no other reason, the King must die because he is here and because I brought him here. Open the door behind you, Isabel, go down the circular stair, and